Brett Heinz

Say what you will, you can’t deny that being signed by Jay-Z, selling 218,000 copies of his number-one bestselling album in the first week, and performing on “Jimmy Kimmel Live,” all by the age of twenty-four, isn’t impressive. North Carolina’s very own Jermaine Lamarr Cole, or “J. Cole,” when rapping, has had a recent streak of success in hip-hop, and his long-awaited debut album *Cole World: The Sideline Story* shows he doesn’t intend it to end any time soon.

The album, released by Fayetteville-native on Jay-Z’s “Roc-A-Fella Records,” is more creative and ambitious than many hip-hop releases today, despite similar content on many selections. Many of the songs on J. Cole’s freshman album, such as “Dollar and a Dream III”, “Sideline Story”, and “Mr. Nice Watch”, the last of which features his mentor and signer Jay-Z, focus on his rise from rags to riches; and although his story is interesting, it seems almost an obsession. Another topic is one modern-day hip-hop has become accustomed to: sex. Although he does make quite a few songs’ speaking out against the misogyny and empty-mindedness in this topic (“Light’s Please,” “Lost Ones), he seems to focus more on glorifying it (“Can’t Get Enough,” “In The Morning,” “Workout”). These songs, although enjoyable all the same, become a bit tiring throughout the album.

Although Cole seems to repeat himself, most of the impressive things about this album aren’t quite as subtle. For example, you might need a little digging to discover that he produced as well as recorded twelve of the sixteen songs on the album. Some songs reflect a lot of emotional effort. For example, one of the album’s best songs, “Breakdown”, features J. rapping about meeting his father for the first time after being abandoned by him as a child and growing up with a mother addicted to using cocaine. Another great song “Lost Ones” is a story about an unmarried couple debating having an abortion after an unwanted pregnancy. The title of the song is also a clever reference to singer/rapper Lauryn Hill, who made a song of the same name and was pressured (but refused) to have an abortion at the peak of her career.

Between a series of interludes, or tracks consisting only of his talking, describing his rise from obscurity to stardom, some repetitive yet well-executed songs, several exceptional songs, and amazing production, it’s clear that J. Cole is already a hot rapper in a very “Cole World”.